

"The Breakers"  
(Cornelius Vanderbilt House)  
East side of Ochre Point Avenue between  
Shepard and Ruggles Avenues  
Newport  
Newport County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-339

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-339

"THE BREAKERS"  
(Cornelius Vanderbilt House)

Location: Northeast corner of Ochre Point Road  
and Ruggles Avenue

Present Owner: Countess Anthony Szapary, et al.

Present Occupants: Owners

Present Use: Historic house museum

Significance: Modeled on the north Italian Villas of Genoa and Turin, "The Breakers" was designed by Richard Morris Hunt. The last of the great Vanderbilt houses he designed, it was erected between 1893 and 1895. More than any other large Newport residence, it stands as the epitome of its time and symbol of Newport's importance as the "watering spot" of the wealthy.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

Chain of Title "The Breakers"

1885 Deed of October 12, 1885, recorded in LEB. 49, p.71.

From: Pierre Lorillard  
To: Cornelius Vanderbilt

"All that parcel of land... with all buildings and improvements thereon being the estate known as the Breakers, now and heretofore the summer residence of said grantor, bounded Northerly on Shephard Avenue and Ruggles Ave., not as yet being highways and said granted land being all the same conveyed to said Lorillard date of August 28, 1877 and record in Volume 48, p.41 L.E.B. of Newport, R.I.; a deed from James N. Platt and others executors & trustees dated March 27, 1882 and recorded in Volume 52, p.485, and a deed from George Atkinson, exec. dated August 26, 1882, Volume 52, p.540.

The property has remained in the Vanderbilt family, and the Countess Anthony Szapary now leases the mansion to the Newport Preservation Society.

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2. Date of erection: 1894 - July, 1895.
3. Architect: Richard Morris Hunt.
4. Builder or contractor, suppliers: Ellin, Kitson & Co., artistic stonework; James Sinclair & Co., masonry contractors; Batterson & Eisele, marble and mosaic work; Mr. J. D. Clarke, heating engineer and contractor; Mr. C. Everett Clark, Boston, general contractor; Alsen's Portland Cement Works, Hamburg, Germany; United States Mortar Supply Company, mortar and plaster.
5. Original plans: There are some original materials still in the family possession.
6. Alterations and additions: There have been no additions to the house. The lamp in the billiard room is not original. There have probably been other such slight alterations to the interior decorations.
7. Important old views: There are numerous photographs of the house. A series of photos showing the monthly construction progress from March, 1893 to July, 1895, is in the possession of the family.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Peabody and Stearns, Architects, Boston, were engaged to design the original "Breakers" for Pierre Lorillard. In 1879, he built a wharf for his steam yacht, Lurline. After purchasing the estate in 1885, Cornelius Vanderbilt made alterations to the estate and employed Peabody and Stearns to design the "Cottage" which was erected in 1886 by McNeill of Boston, a contractor. On 25 November 1892 the house was destroyed by fire. Since the erection of the present building it has symbolized the "Ideal." Life at "The Breakers" was conducted in a proper and orderly manner. Early in the morning the carriage book was delivered to the house. Mrs. Vanderbilt would indicate the various trips to be made by the family member, the carriage, horses and livery to be employed. The three major functions of the house were the responsibility of the butler, housekeeper and the chef. Besides the general staff of three people in the kitchen, three people in the pantry, parlor maid, upstairs maid, chamber maid and a laundry staff of three blacks who did not live-in, Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt had a personal valet and ladies maid respectively. There was a workshop in the basement for the houseman who tended the fireplaces, polished the brass and made necessary repairs. The grounds were maintained by the gardener and his staff. The green-houses and cutting gardens were located at Ruggles and Coggeshall adjacent to the stables. Mrs. Vanderbilt made random inspections of the house and estate accompanied by the butler and housekeeper.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Records and Deeds in the Newport City Hall.

Gooch, Stapleton Dabney, IV. "The Vanderbilt Family and Richard Morris Hunt." Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1968.

Howland, Catherine Clinton. The Richard Morris Hunt Papers, 1878-1895. Edited by Alan Burnham. (Unpublished manuscript in the American Architectural Archives.)

Interview with Countess Anthony Szapary, June, 1971.

2. Secondary and published materials:

"Artistic Stone Carving." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp.190-91.

"Marble Work." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp.194-95.

"Machine-Made Mortar." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, p.202.

"Modern Stonework." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp. 192-193.

"Portland Cement." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp.198-199

"Steam Heating." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp. 196-197.

"The Work of the General Contractor." The Architectural Record, October-December, 1895, pp.215-6.

Andrews, Wayne. The Vanderbilt Legend. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941

Downing, Antoinette F. and Scully, Vincent J., Jr. The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island. 2nd. ed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967.

Hoyt, Edwin P. The Vanderbilts and Their Fortune. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1962.

Newport Mercury, September 15, 1877, p.2.

\_\_\_\_\_, August 16, 1879, p.2.

\_\_\_\_\_, July 3, 1886, p.2.

\_\_\_\_\_, November 25, 1892, p.2.

Schuyler, Montgomery. "The Works of the Late Richard M. Hunt,"  
The Architectural Record, Vol. V. October-December,  
1895, pp. 97-180.

Smales, Holbert T. "The Breakers" Newport, Rhode Island  
Newport, R.I.: [Newport, R.I.: Remington Ward, 1951.]

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

The Vanderbilt family papers, as well as the office record and  
drawings of Richard Morris Hunt.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The some seventy rooms of "The Breakers" enclose a two story cortile and loggia that face southeast to the sea.
2. Condition of fabric: The building and its furnishings are in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: About 250 feet by 150 feet; rectangular with kitchen ell at north corner; 3½ stories.
2. Foundations: The foundations are of cement made by Alsen's Portland Cement Works, Hamburg, Germany. Approximately 10,000 barrels of concrete were used.
3. Wall construction. Buff Indiana limestone was employed for the walls. Brick and tile were used in some areas.
4. Structural system: Steel beams form a lattice that carries the shallow brick and tile arches. The building is fireproof.
5. Chimneys: There are thirteen stone chimneys. The chimney caps are in form of Renaissance sarcophagi.

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6. Openings:

- a. The entrance doors are carved oak. Although very heavy, they are perfectly balanced on their hinges. The interior doors of the vestibule are topped by a semi-circular fanlight. Both the hand-wrought iron grille doors and fanlight are glazed. In order to facilitate cleaning, the door leaves open like pages in a book, giving clear access to the plate glass panel within. Entry onto the loggia from the house is through French windows in the cortile, or great hall, billiard room, and morning room. There are French windows that open to the southwest terrace from the music room. The French windows have semi-circular top lights with a vertical mullion corresponding to the casements below. The upper loggia is entered through French windows from bedrooms. There is a below grade service entrance in the northeast wall.
- b. Windows and shutters: Most windows on the first floor are French windows or casements. Some windows, particularly in service areas, are double-hung. Casement windows predominate on the second floor, and double-hung windows are used on the third floor. Many windows have folding or sliding louvered shutters.

7. Roof: The main portion of the house has a flat topped hip roof whose sloping sides are clad in reddish tiles. Seven small skylights in the flat portion of the roof light the attic. A very large skylight over a light shaft illuminates a stained glass ceiling above the grand staircase.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: See Appendix for main floor plan.
2. Stairways: Five marble steps in the entrance hall ascend to the main floor level. The marble grand staircase rises from the great hall floor to a landing and thence in opposite directions to secondary landings and thence in twin flights to the westerly second-floor gallery of the great hall. The flights sweep upward in graceful curves on open arches. The closed marble stringers are carved in a Vitruvian wave motif and are surmounted by elaborate wrought iron and bronze railings. There is a fountain within the arch below the first flight.

A relatively ornate secondary, or private, staircase is enclosed between the entrance hall and the library. A utilitarian service stair is in a passage between the butler's pantry and the kitchen.

3. Flooring: The entrance hall, great hall, or cortile, and loggia are paved with squares of polished marble. The billiard room has a patterned floor of mosaic tesserae set in concentric circles.

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The music room and morning room have hardwood floors laid in a square parquet design. The butler's pantry has a concrete floor, and the kitchen has a floor of ceramic tile. The other rooms have hardwood floors laid in a herringbone pattern.

4. Interior finishes and decorative features: A small room simply paneled in quartered oak opens left from the entrance hall. The corresponding reception room at the right of the hall is paneled in carved and gilded cream colored Louis XVI boiseries ordered by Queen Marie Antoinette for the Hôtel de St. Aulaire in Paris.

The galleried great hall rises over forty-five feet and is nearly sixty feet square. The walls are Caen stone inset with rare marbles. Each side has three bays articulated by colossal stop-fluted pilasters on plinths. The first-floor bays are arched, and each rectangular second-floor opening is subdivided by a marble column and guarded by a pair of lacy bronze railings. Opposite the grand staircase is a large Caen stone fireplace, its richly carved frieze and hood supported by lavishly ornamented consoles. The hall pilasters support a gilded frieze of alto relievo putti and swags and a denticulated and modillioned cornice. The heavily coffered gilded ceiling contains a large square cove framing a central flat area painted to resemble a lightly clouded sky.

The library is paneled in Circassian walnut highlighted with gilding in the sixteenth-century French Renaissance style. Arabesque-carved pilasters flank arch-headed glazed bookcases, and a high paneled frieze runs below the bracketed ceiling cornice. The ceiling is deeply coffered and parcel gilded. The principal feature of the room is a sixteenth-century stone fireplace from the Chateau d'Armay-le-Duc, the colonettes of its overmantel framing four bas-relief roundels.

The music room interior was designed by Richard Bouwens Van der Boyen, a French architect of Dutch or Flemish descent, and made entirely in Paris by the firm of Allard et Fils, who supervised the installation. The walls are sheathed in pale gray and gold paneling designed in an eclectic mélange of Renaissance and Baroque motifs perhaps best classified stylistically as "grand luxe." Engaged and free-standing columns on plinths, the lower thirds of their fluted shafts banded with gilded arabesques, articulate the fireplace wall and the large curved bay opposite it. Arabesque-paneled pilasters, inset mirrors and mirrored sliding doors, and carved panels with marble bosses enrich the other walls, and the central bays of the end walls are sheathed in blue-gray Campan marble fronted by elaborate tabernacle frames containing mirrors. The fireplace bay, also of Campan marble, has a console-flanked mantelpiece of the same marble ornamented with ormolu mounts. The overmantel, composed of a pedimented mirror flanked by niches, is inlaid with precious marbles. The

side bays of the silver and gold-leafed ceiling are deeply coffered, and the flat central portion is frescoed in the neo-classical manner and includes figures symbolizing Music, Harmony, Melody and Song.

The morning room in the same style as the music room was also designed by Van der Boyen and executed by Allard et Fils. Ionic pilasters articulate the bays. The general tonality is a warm gray to accord with representations of eight of the nine muses painted in oil on silver leaf in the corner panels. (Polyhmnia was omitted for lack of a ninth panel.) The four elements are painted in grisaille on the mahogany sliding doors, and the four seasons, represented on the ceiling, complete the program of allegorical paintings in the Italian Renaissance manner.

The three-bayed loggia between the morning room and the billiard room is open on the seaward side. The groin vaulted ceiling and the tympana of the limestone end walls are embellished with mosaics of formal neo-Renaissance motifs in comparatively muted tones.

The billiard room, designed by Hunt, is sheathed throughout in pale gray-green Cippolino marble with yellow alabaster blind arches above which are alabaster frames with inserts of precious marbles. The large central panel of the white mosaic ceiling depicts a mother and two children at a Roman bath. Winged putti in high relief bear an oval marble boss on the frieze of the large marble mantelpiece of this room.

The state dining room is in many respects the most sumptuous room in the house. Excepting the great hall, it is also the largest, measuring forty-two by fifty-eight feet on plan and rising fully two stories high. Twelve free-standing red alabaster monolithic columns with gilded bronze Corinthian capitals support an entablature that includes a swag-enriched frieze and a boldly projecting modilioned cornice. The Cippolino marble hooded chimneypiece stands against a background of silver leaf painted in a Renaissance pattern. A window centered on the long interior wall affords a view of the fountain under the grand staircase. Above the doors are bas relief roundels in elaborate gilded mantling. Over the cornice, the tympana of the end walls are frescoed. Lavishly ornamented urns on podia above the columns flank life-sized sculptured nude figures seated amid a plethora of fruit below an oeil-de-boeuf window. Each of the side bays contains a similar pair and window within the groins supported by the columns. Above highly ornamented pendentives and the end tympana, a lavish secondary cornice surrounds three magnificently framed ceiling paintings, the large central one representing Aurora in her chariot. The panoply of rich materials and splendid ornament in this room remains unexcelled in America even by the finest movie palaces of the 1920s.



The pale green and gold Rococo panels of the breakfast room, or family dining room, are said to have come from a French mansion dating from the reign of Louis XV. Several of the panels contain delicately carved trophies of musical instruments. The relatively simple mantelpiece in this room is carved from Paonazetta marble.

The butler's pantry contains a warming oven and glazed cupboards for china and glass. The cupboards are on both the main floor and on a mezzanine, or balcony, that runs around the room. A silver safe adjoins the butler's pantry, and a passage leading to the kitchen is fitted up for flower arranging. The very large kitchen is two stories high. A coal range and broiler with mechanical spit occupy most of one side.

Suites composed of sitting rooms, bedrooms, dressing rooms and bathrooms occupy the second floor. The ten rooms open off the gallery of the great hall and are far less elaborate than the first-floor rooms. The sleeping apartment interiors were designed by Ogden Codman in a restrained Louis XVI manner. The general tonality is antique ivory, often with panels of inset figured fabric, as advocated by Elsie De Wolf. Each suite has a tiled bathroom. The upper loggia ceiling is painted to represent three canopies against a blue sky.

4. Hardware: The hardware throughout the house accords with the various styles represented by the different interiors. All hardware in the major areas was specially designed, and most of it is executed in gilt bronze.
5. Heating: The original heating plant was placed in a large excavation under the caretaker's lodge adjacent to the main entrance gates. This room containing the furnace and boiler can hold several hundred tons of coal and is connected by a large tunnel several hundred feet long to the main house.
6. Lighting: The lighting fixtures are specially designed to accord with the styles of the rooms in which they are placed. They are supplied with both electricity and gas in case of power failures. The central area of the great hall is lighted by four very large chandeliers and by eight five-light sculptured bronze standards in the Italian Renaissance manner. The library has bronze sconces, each bearing five electric candles and two gas candles. The music room contains two large crystal chandeliers with gas candles and a very few electric candles and a bronze crystal-hung scone of six electric candles on each of the fourteen free-standing columns. Bronze sconces combining gas and electricity light the morning room. The loggia has wrought iron standards, and a wrought iron fixture hangs over the billiard table. The billiard room walls bear bronze fixtures in the form of torcheres. The state dining

room is lighted by two very large crystal chandeliers and a crystal scone on each of the twelve alabaster columns. The family dining room has ornate sconces. The service areas are lighted by utilitarian gas and electric combination fixtures.

7. Plumbing: The second-floor bathrooms are supplied with hot and cold fresh and hot and cold salt water bathtub faucets. Soft rain water collected in cisterns under the terrace was pumped to a large attic tank and ran by gravity flow to the various bathrooms. Salt water was pumped to an attic reservoir directly from the ocean.

NOTE: The data in Section C are based in part on Smales, Holbert T., "The Breakers" Newport, Rhode Island, a handbook published in 1951.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The house, a short distance from the ocean, sits atop the bluff at Ochre Point overlooking the breaking surf below. Placed diagonally on the site, the entrance faces northwest. Three other similar estates are situated to the north along Ochre Point Road. The nearby Ochre Court, built for Ogden Goelet and now housing Salve Regina College, was designed by Richard Morris Hunt in 1889-1891, shortly before he designed The Breakers.

Prepared by: Osmund Overby  
Historian  
National Park Service  
August 1970  
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Historian  
HABS/HAER  
December 1983

PART III PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1969. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby (University of Missouri), Project Supervisor. Jack E. Boucher, photographer.

APPENDIX

Plan drawn by Warren Oakley. From Downing, Antoinette F. and Vincent J. Scully, Jr. The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island. Cambridge: Harverd University Press, 1952.

